

18. The Essential Features of the Teaching of Sri Ramana Maharshi

*The Self, the Sole Reality,
Ever-existent, Formless Power
Taught of yore by the First of Teachers [Dakshinamurti],
As ever, through unbroken Silence –
The Primal Sound [aksara],
Who can reveal it in words?*

This chapter is only an introduction to Sri Ramana's teaching. For a deeper understanding it is recommended that the reader study the works written by and about him, such as the 'Collected Works', the 'Talks', 'Maharshi's Gospel', 'Be As You Are' and other collections of talks as given in the bibliography.

The Path of Self-Enquiry

Although Sri Ramana Maharshi was a spiritual master of the highest order, his teaching contains nothing which is new of itself. It belongs to the tradition of the Hindu *Advaita-Vedanta*, in which he found his own experience explained and interpreted. *Vedanta* means literally 'end of the *Vedas*' and is a school of philosophy in Hinduism which finds its profoundest expression in the *Upanishads*. *Vedanta* and *Advaita* are often used synonymously or in conjunction. One of the principal exponents of *Advaita-Vedanta* was *Shankara* who lived in the 8th century AD.

The fundamental teaching of *Advaita*, which literally means 'non-duality', is that the Absolute is not two, but only One. All manifestations are appearances within this one Reality. *Atman* (the divine within the human being) is identical with *Brahman* (the basis or

One evening, devotees asked Sri Ramana to explain the meaning of *Shankara's* hymn in praise of *Dakshinamurti* (*Dakshinamurti Stotram*). They waited for his answer, but in vain. The Maharshi sat motionless on his seat, in total silence.

The intense power and peace of his presence enveloped all those present to such a degree that they sat through the night, without any of them noticing the passage of time. In this way eight hours passed by. When finally Ramana stood up to go for his morning walk, the others became aware for the first time that it was now morning. For the whole night he had been commenting upon the meaning of *Shankara's* verses by his example. The next day he said to his devotees, "True Silence means abiding in the Self."

On another occasion he explained, "*Dakshinamurti*, i.e., the great *Shiva* himself could not express the truth of the one Reality except by silence. But that silence could not be understood except by the very advanced. The others have to be told."¹⁴⁷

How powerful Sri Ramana's silence was, is illustrated by the following episode, which the cook Shantamma has recorded for us, "One morning a European came in a horse carriage to the Ashram and went straight to Bhagavan. He wrote something on a piece of paper and showed it to Bhagavan. Bhagavan did not answer; instead he gazed at the stranger with unwinking eyes. The stranger was staring back at him. Then Bhagavan closed his eyes and the stranger also closed his. They stayed without moving. At mealtime the meals were served but Bhagavan would not open his eyes. Madhavaswami, the attendant, got Bhagavan's water pot and stood ready to lead Bhagavan out of the Hall. Bhagavan would not stir. We felt afraid to go near, such was the intensity around him. His face was glowing with a strange light. The guests in the dining hall

¹⁴⁷ Mudaliar: Day by Day, p. 22

of such enquiry into the Source of Aham-vritti [I-thought] is verily the Heart as the undifferentiated Light of pure Consciousness, into which the reflected light of the mind is completely absorbed.”¹⁴⁴

In its deepest meaning the spiritual Heart is identical with the Self (*atman*), God and Guru and in the final analysis not restricted to any particular spot in the body. To a question from a disciple about the meaning of the Heart Sri Ramana answered, “Call it by any name, God, Self, the Heart or the Seat of Consciousness, it is all the same. The point to be grasped is this, that Heart means the very Core of one’s being, the Centre, without which there is nothing whatever.”¹⁴⁵ And elsewhere, “The Heart is not physical. Meditation should not be on the right or the left. Meditation should be on the Self. Everyone knows ‘I am’. Who is the ‘I’? It will be neither within nor without, neither on the right nor on the left. ‘I am’ – that is all.”¹⁴⁶

Teaching through Silence

Sri Ramana was and is, first and foremost, a master who teaches through silence. His deepest teaching is found neither in his spoken answers to seekers, nor in his written works, but in his powerful silence – because the Truth transcends all words. His method of teaching is often compared to that of *Dakshinamurti*, who is the young *Shiva*, seated under a banyan tree. At his feet are his four disciples, whom he taught through silence only. He is seen as the guru of all gurus and represents the ascetic aspect of *Shiva*. His statue can be found in every temple in Southern Indian.

¹⁴⁴ Maharshi’s Gospel, p. 83. About the spiritual Heart see also in the same book part II, chapters 4 and 5.

¹⁴⁵ *dto.*, p.66

¹⁴⁶ Talks, p. 229 (from Talk 273)

The Sanskrit verse starts with “Hridaya kuhara madhye”, “in the interior of the Heart-cave”. The sacred Hindu scriptures stress that *Brahman* shines in the heart of all living beings. Sri Ramana takes up this statement and develops it in more detail. In the cave of the Heart, i.e. in its inmost centre, *atman*, which is identical with *Brahman* is experienced as ‘I-I’. ‘I-I’ means continuous Self-consciousness, Self-awareness, which is in each person’s immediate experience, and which cannot be doubted, even in deep-sleep. ‘I-I’ is the true ‘I’ or Self, which was already there, is eternal and never changing. The individual I, the changeable and unsteady ego, has its source here. If the I-thought is traced back to its origin and merges there, it finally comes to an end there forever, and this is ‘Self Realization’.

In this verse three paths are mentioned by which one can enter the Heart:- the path of Self-enquiry, the path of diving deep and the path of breath control. Sri Ramana’s teaching concentrates mainly on Self-enquiry. “Diving deep” is explained by the example of the pearl-diver, which Ramana gives in ‘Nan Yar’ saying that just as the pearl-diver ties a stone round his waist, holds his breath and concentrates one-pointedly on his single goal, which is to dive into the sea in order to find the precious pearl, likewise the seeker should dive into the Heart.

The path of breath-control does not refer to pranayama as practised in hatha yoga, but simply to watching the breath, as is practised in some forms of Zen meditation, as mind and breath have the same root, as Ramana repeatedly stressed. If the breath is watched, it comes to rest.

Whatever means one uses, the important thing is the goal, which is to reach the Heart and remain there forever, to be it. In the Heart, Self-enquiry finds its end, it dissolves in the realisation of the Heart, as Sri Ramana once said, “What is finally realized as a result

The Spiritual Heart

Sri Ramana liked to speak about the ‘Heart’ (*hridayam*) as the place of the spiritual experience. The ‘Heart’ referred to is not the physical heart, but the spiritual Heart, which is on the right side, two finger-widths to the right of the middle of the chest. There dwells the experience of one’s true identity. This can be demonstrated in everyday experience by the fact that people intuitively point to this spot when pointing to themselves. The I-thought arises here. “*Hridayam*=*hrit*+*ayam* = this is the centre. It is that from which thoughts arise, on which they subsist and where they are resolved. The thoughts are the content of the mind and, they shape the universe. The Heart is the centre of all.”¹⁴²

The teaching about the spiritual Heart did not originate with Sri Ramana himself. He found it and adopted it, as it corresponded to his own experience. In the *Maha Narayana Upanishad* which is one of the sacred Hindu scriptures it says, “It must be understood that the Heart resembling the lotus, a span below the throat and a span above the navel hangs upside down and is the chief seat of the Universal form of *paramatman*.”¹⁴³

Sri Ramana’s teaching about the Heart is found in particular in the famous verse included in Ganapati Muni’s ‘*Ramana Gita*’ and which has already been quoted in chapter 8,

“In the interior of the Heart-cave *Brahman* alone shines in the form of the *atman* with direct immediacy as I, as I. Enter into the Heart with questing mind or by diving deep within or through control of breath, and abide in the *atman*.”

¹⁴² Talks, p. 92 (from Talk 97)

¹⁴³ transl. in: Sadhu Arunachala: Reminiscences, p. 97

He also describes Realization of the Self as follows, “In a pinhole camera, when the hole is small, you see shapes and colours. When the hole is made big, the images disappear and one sees only clear light. Similarly when the mind is small and narrow, it is full of shapes and words. When it broadens, it sees pure light. When the box is destroyed altogether, only the light remains.”¹⁴⁰

Although Sri Ramana supported all spiritual paths, he untiringly and expressly recommended Self-enquiry as the most effective path, in which all other paths finally merge. He constantly advised seekers to ask themselves the question, “Who am I?” When a confessed atheist provocatively asked him, “Is there God; can you prove the existence of God.” he smiled and replied, “Why worry about God? Let Him worry about Himself! Find out who raises the question.” The atheist was puzzled. Sri Ramana recommended that he read the book ‘Who am I?’ The visitor, who only wanted to stay for a few hours, ended up staying for several days. Finally he said, “Bhagavan! When I came here as an atheist, denying God, I was happy. But, now, after asking myself the question ‘Who am I?’ I am thoroughly confused. I feel I have deteriorated; therefore I am very unhappy.” Sri Ramana smiled at him and said, “Your confusion is not a state of deterioration. All these days you have been indifferent to the truth behind your own existence. Now you have raised the fundamental question; thereby you have moved away from indifference. So it is only an improvement! From indifference to confusion, from confusion to clarity, from (intellectual) clarity to experience and from experience to abidance in the Self – this is the order of ascendancy in spiritual *sadhana*.”¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Tales of Bhagavan. In Ramana Smrti, p. [95]

¹⁴¹ Purushottama Ramana, p. [10]

emerge, the fortress will fall into our hands.”¹³⁵ And at another time he explained, “Abhyasa [practice] consists in withdrawal within the Self every time you are disturbed by thoughts. It is not concentration or destruction of the mind but withdrawal into the Self.”¹³⁶

But what remains when the ego is dissolved?

Sri Ramana, “People are afraid that when ego or mind is killed, the result may be a mere blank and not happiness. What really happens is that the thinker, the object of thought and thinking, all merge in the one Source, which is Consciousness and Bliss itself, and thus that state is neither inert nor blank. I don’t understand why people should be afraid of that state in which all thoughts cease to exist and the mind is killed. They are every day experiencing that state in sleep. There is no mind or thought in sleep. Yet when one rises from sleep one says, ‘I slept happily’.”¹³⁷

The Maharshi stressed that the so called ‘Self Realization’ is neither a spectacular happening nor something new to be gained, “What is Self Realization? A mere phrase. People expect some miracle to happen, something to drop from Heaven in a flash. It is nothing of the sort. Only the notion that you are the body, that you are this or that, will go, and you remain as you are. Indeed, Realization is but another name for the Self.”¹³⁸ And elsewhere he says, “It is false to speak of Realization. What is there to realize? The real is as it is, ever. How to real-ize it? All that is required is this. We have realized the unreal, i.e. regarded as real what is unreal. We have to give up this attitude. That is all that is required for us to attain *jnana*.”¹³⁹

¹³⁵ dto., p. 45

¹³⁶ Talks, p. 464 (from Talk 485)

¹³⁷ Mudaliar: Day by Day, p. 65

¹³⁸ Subbaramayya: Reminiscences, p. 138

¹³⁹ Mudaliar: Day by Day, p. 88

And when being asked, “What is the means for constantly holding on to the thought ‘Who am I?’”, Sri Ramana explains in very precise terms, “When other thoughts arise, one should not pursue them, but should inquire: ‘To whom did they arise? It does not matter how many thoughts arise. As each thought arises, one should inquire with diligence, ‘To whom has this thought arisen?’ The answer that would emerge would be, ‘To me.’ Thereupon if one inquires ‘Who am I?’ the mind will go back to its source; and the thought that arose will become quiescent. With repeated practice in this manner, the mind will develop the skill to stay in its source. When the mind that is subtle goes out through the brain and the sense-organs, the gross names and forms appear; when it stays in the heart, the names and forms disappear. Not letting the mind go out but retaining it in the Heart is what is called ‘inwardness’ (antarmukha). Letting the mind go out of the Heart is known as ‘externalization’ (bahir-mukha). Thus, when the mind stays in the Heart, the ‘I’ which is the source of all thoughts will go, and the Self which ever exists will shine. Whatever one does, one should do without the egoity ‘I’. If one acts in that way, all will appear as of the nature of *Shiva* (God).”¹³⁴

The seeker has to practise this turning back continuously. Sri Ramana made no secret of the fact that it could be a lengthy struggle. When Sivaprakasam Pillai questioned him, “How long should inquiry be practised?” He answered, “As long as there are impressions of objects in the mind, the inquiry ‘Who am I?’ is required. As thoughts arise they should be destroyed then and there in the very place of their origin, through enquiry. If one resorted to contemplation of the Self unintermittently, until the Self was gained, that alone would do. As long as there are enemies within the fortress, they will continue to sally forth; if they are destroyed as they

¹³⁴ Collected Works. pp. 42ff (from ‘Who am I’)

known as ‘Self Realization’. Henceforth everything is experienced as the one Self. The experience of the *jnani*, who has reached this final goal, is described as *sat-chit-ananda* (Being-Consciousness-Bliss).

Sri Ramana explains this search for the Self as follows, “You are the mind or think that you are the mind. The mind is nothing but thoughts. Now behind every particular thought there is a general thought which is the ‘I’, that is yourself. Let us call this ‘I’ the first thought. Stick to this I-thought and question it to find out what it is. When this question takes strong hold on you, you cannot think of other thoughts. ... What happens when you make a serious quest for the Self is that the I-thought as a thought disappears, something else from the depths takes hold of you and that is not the ‘I’ which commenced the quest. ... That is the real Self, the import of I. It is not the ego. It is the Supreme Being itself.”¹³¹

And in his booklet ‘Who am I?’ (Nan Yar) it says that the enquiry at first may also be a mental process, but with continued practice it destroys all thoughts and at last itself. “By the inquiry ‘Who am I?’ the thought ‘Who am I?’ will destroy all other thoughts, and like the stick used for stirring the burning pyre, it will itself in the end get destroyed. Then, there will arise Self Realization.”¹³² In this way the I-thought - the feeling of being a separate personality – will be dissolved.

A visitor once asked, “How are these thoughts to be ended?” Ramana replied, “Find out their basis. All of them are strung on the single ‘I’-thought. Quell it; all others are quashed.” When the visitor asked further, “How to quell the ‘I’-thought?” the answer was, “If its source is sought it does not arise, and thus it is quelled.”¹³³

¹³¹ Sat-Darshana Bhashya, p. III

¹³² Collected Works, p. 42

¹³³ Talks, p. 345 (from Talk 379)

source of the universe, the Absolute). Separate from this One Reality nothing exists:- there is no separate world, no separate God and no separate individual Ego. All is contained in *Brahman*. The feeling of being a separate, independent individual is the essential problem of the human condition. But how does this feeling of individuality arise at all?

Sri Ramana explains that individuality is nothing more than a thought or an idea. The I-thought 'I am' is the first thought which arises from the Heart-centre (for further details about the spiritual Heart see below), having arisen it identifies itself with the body, its actions and perceptions. (The term 'body' must be understood here in its fullest sense.) As a result, various thoughts and emotions arise which veil one's true identity. An individual subject sees itself as being separate from countless objects and an objective world. This individual 'I' now not only says about itself "I am", but further describes itself by saying "I am this or that" and "I am doing this and that."

Liberation according to Sri Ramana is found by reversing this process through Self-enquiry (Atma Vichara). One must, as it were, go back the way one came. He recommends asking oneself the question "Who am I?" The 'I' in this quest being the first I-thought, the I-feeling, on which all other thoughts and emotions are based. If one is able to keep one's attention on this pure I-consciousness, all other thoughts will be eliminated. Identification of the I-thought with the multitude of thoughts and objects will cease, as concentration on the I-thought severs this connection. In this way objects disappear as objects. Thoughts dissolve and finally even the first I-thought disappears. The true Self is revealed in its place. The mind sinks back into the spiritual Heart, whence it arose. The power of the Self draws it back to the place of its origin and finally totally destroys it, so that it can no longer arise. Only the Self remains. The ego is destroyed forever. This is what is

were waiting and the food before them was getting cold. Chinnaswami was talking loudly to attract Bhagavan's attention. Even vessels were banged about, but all in vain. When the clock was striking twelve Bhagavan opened his eyes. They were glowing very brightly. Madhavaswami took up the water jug; the European got into the carriage and went away. It was the last we saw of him. We did not even get his name."¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Shantamma: *Eternal Bhagavan*. In: *Ramana Smrti*, p. [83]